

# ADVERTISING AS A LITERARY GENRE: AN APPROACH TO THE CREATION OF ADVERTISING BASED ON THE FORMULATION OF CASES AND CHARACTERS THAT MARKED THE IMAGINARY OF AUDIENCES AND CONSUMERS

## Abstract

This paper addresses an issue that is neither new, nor has been taken into account by the scholars of the fields of advertising and literary theory. Even if there are articles that approach that subject and discuss it to a certain extent, the references of the courses on the nature of literary genres or on the limits and scope of literature do not contain any relevant works for that discussion. This is not intentional, since such works simply do not exist, but if they would, those courses would have a very different meaning and scope.

**Keywords:** advertising, language, literature, narratives, writing, fiction, culture.

Introduction. It's not a new issue. Not even a recent one. It is an ancient discussion that has taken place almost out of amateurism. There was a time, in the distant 1970s, when the similarities between writing advertising and the literary text were often mentioned in the classroom, just as the question of the relations between art and the art of advertising.

However, that's a thing of the past. Despite the few articles on this subject, the discussion never got very far, which is in part due to the fact that it lacks practical implications. Those topics, it seems, only serve to increase the archives of knowledge about advertising, art, or literature. Huge archives that have accumulate conclusions, analyzes and scientific debates of great importance for more than a century. However, they have failed to produce any practical contribution that would alter or support changes in the process of creation, production and propagation of advertising.

One of the most interesting works on the subject about literature, culture and advertising, was written by Strachan and Nally; it analyzes a period of three decades of works involving mainly the print production between 1891 and 1922 in Ireland [11]. The authors, professors of literature at the University of Northumbria at Newcastle, North-East of England, aim to demonstrate how narrow the limits between advertising and literature actually are.

The first author published a previous work that was mainly about advertising and satirical texts of the Irish romantic period [10]. Although the author – as he might not integrate one of the practical sides of life and imagines that everything is about the events unleashed by “evil and cruel capitalism” – supports the thesis of advertising as “the main instrument of that form of capitalism,” but he also develops a serious reflection on the parallels between advertising texts and literature between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The efforts he makes to demonstrate how that occurs are admirable. His work draws on authors such as George Grabbe, Charles Dickens and Lord Byron and their influences on the writing of advertising. He also provides a wide range of examples to show in what manner that what he calls “business language” influences literary descriptions. It is highly amusing, e.g., to recall passages from *The Adventures of Mr. Pickwick* [3]. Dickens' main character, Mr. Samuel Pickwick, writes business letters and reproduces them in the literary text in style and content, exactly the way these letters were drafted by the offices of that time.

Advertising and the imaginary. A recent book by a professor emeritus from McMaster University in Canada further develops the idea of multilateral influences between advertising and literature [7]. This study, called *Designing fictions*, is an in-depth study and one of the publications that explore the aspect of literature embedded in advertising pieces more deeply. One of the author's concerns is whether fiction has a right to criticize the role of advertising in the universe of consumption – he quotes, e.g., works such as those by H. G. Wells – and whether the advertising text has the same right regarding the construction of a fictional imaginary.

In other words, he proposes an extremely instigating topic: no matter which is which, in the universe of consumption, everything is fiction, even if we acquire, from that universe, the materiality of the goods or things that we purchase.

The author also discusses George Orwell and establishes an interesting parallel between poetry and advertising by interconnecting arguments he extracts from a novel by that author, *Keep the Aspidochelone* [6], which reflects on conformism in the capitalist society, more specifically on the aim to conquer and enjoy everything that comfort offers for accumulated money. It is actually a critical view of the world of money, consumption and capitalism, a process which is headed by the action of advertising. In addition, the author revisits Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*, a novel about a young and recently graduated marketing researcher who lives comfortably with what the world offers, following closely what she has designed for herself and what the media suggests. But then, she loses her appetite as she gets into a troubled relationship that takes her beyond those patterns and begins to question everything she has known so far. This book deeply questions consumption and the relations of such a conformed life, pointing at an imaginary based on actual advertising.

In the universe of that imaginary construction every single human being faces, regardless of what he or she is, thinks, does, or wants, advertising has a supposedly literary function. There is a kind of fictional thread that cannot be escaped. Shari Graydon [5], for example, asserts that trademarks or so-called brand names provide (or derive from) production ideas and policies, whose transformation into commodities is always guided by a fictional universe that accompanies these commodities. A fiction we could call a parallel fiction. Parallel because it accompanies one's everyday life in the form of a complex web of imaginary situations that gathers aspirations, motivations and determinations. A web in which not everything is real, where the fantasies arising from the bombardment by brands, campaigns and promotions seduce consumers and settle in the imaginary of consumption.

It is undoubtedly that imaginary of consumption, more than anything else, that literally rewrites the individualized story of each advertising campaign. That's how it works. Given this fact, two works of fiction on advertising should be reviewed. First of all – and far from the academic dimension that these two works might feature and which certainly point in the same direction –, one must seek to understand their fictional plot.

The first one is a small romance about the life, mistakes and hassles of a young advertising professional [4]. Published in early 1972, it highlights the market contradictions that lead to creative appeals that ultimately end up also engulfing those who create them. That's roughly what also takes place in the second work, a movie shot in 1990, *Crazy people* [12], which is based on the anecdotal aspect of the creation of publicity to narrate the fictional side of creating ads.

The mere demonstration of a plot involving a hypothetical advertising agency, turning the creation of campaigns into a "crazy thing", subtracted from its humorous aspect, already points to that relationship between the narrative about the narrated object and the object itself, which is also part of the fictional universe. It's as if we stated that the narrative implied in the creation, embedded into the frescoes of the Sistine Chapel by the different artists who made it, transcends into the narratives of each fresco and is simultaneously converted into the genre, plot and process of narrating or describing. The element that articulates that relation is eventually an imaginary artifice.

Advertising is no different. The film *Crazy people* shows that this articulation between the created object and the narratives that composes it points to that same element of articulation, this imaginary artifice that ultimately inserts one story into another one.

Hardly can one demand more of imagination than the capacity to imagine we already have. What we imagine is what can be. Literature is constructed in that manner. All fiction is a tangle of assumptions which, whether plausible or not, point to a factual possibility, even if it is impossible from a rational point of view.

In this sense, human life is ruled by the boundaries between what life actually is and what it represents. Our delusions or reveries always depend on an external stimulus to project themselves into the common aspects of life. All that, of which only memories remain, such as the stories we were told, the photographs we kept, the books we read, the plays, the movies or any other spectacle

we watched, are part of an enormous collection, be it present or not in our memory, that is completed by that which is real in our lives.

All that includes advertising, of course. Entire generations grew up watching ads. The imaginary of entire generations still holds parts or entire pieces from advertising campaigns, either in the form of “slogans” that defined the message that followed, or songs that accompanied TV movies that were still precarious at that time, or (and mainly) entire plots that included a particular ad in the form of a “very short story”, all of which is still remembered to date.

When I published my book called *O anúncio publicitário* [1], as part of a research I developed at the CEDE, on the issue of aesthetics in advertising, the discussion of the literary genre as a classification category came up for the first time. It has somehow been a delicate subject, but there is no way to escape it, because that way of telling, of saying something within the limits of a kind of plot that is created to call the attention of the public that watches the ad, ends up becoming a very specific “type of literature”.

Of course, advertising is very brief. Very brief and very ephemeral. Ultimately, it conveys it all in thirty seconds. If it is not well understood, all is lost and all efforts will have been in vain. However, it always says what it wants to. And, most of the time, it’s very well understood. Well understood and on some occasions, it remains forever in our memory.

The catchword “Varig, Varig, Varig” is one example, just as the unforgettable exclamation “Ah! Viva a vida” [Ah! Hooray to life] by Kolynos. Or, surely everyone remembers that “statement”, “Nove entre dez estrelas usam Lux!” [Nine out of ten stars use Lux!]. Songs that accompanied the black and white movies of the old campaigns for “Cobertores Parahyba”, [Parahyba Blankets] that would say: “Está na hora de dormir / não espere mamãe mandar / um bom sono pra você / e um alegre despertar” [It’s bedtime / do not wait till Mom sends you to bed / sleep well / and have a joyful awakening], just to mention a few [13].

I refer, of course, to Brazilian advertising films. However, I could mention an endless range of campaigns that were broadcast, e.g., in the United States, such as those produced for Mustang automobiles or Rolex watches. That list includes films in all languages and from all cultures that were mainly created in the 20th century, but which are remembered to date. They help us not only define and understand the historical periods, the stages of available technology, but above all something they have in common: plots, “stories” and “fictional” contexts that refer to creative writing.

When Brazil began to import automobiles in the late 1980s, which had been banned from the domestic market for many years, a new language appeared in those films. That language, probably devised by the need to establish a contrast between the “national imaginary” and the “imaginary brought about by imports”, highlighted car features that were almost abstract. The first car imported and sold on a large scale in Brazil was the Russian Lada, whose model, Laika, was launched on the domestic market by merely emphasizing its “quality in design”.

Advertising and fictional exercise. One notices that this so-called fictional exercise contains a certain dispute of plots, which only literature can explain, since in literature per se, logic is not a priority. The immediate persuasive element aimed at by advertising is of much greater importance. However, we may say that the presence of “characters” in each plot disguises not only the small amount of plot, but also the little time there is to tell a story. Undeniably, one of the main features of this genre of literature is to tell a story in an extremely short time span. This time span, in Brazil, is restricted to thirty seconds.

In addition to that brief time span to catch the attention of the audience, advertising also uses “slogans” to make its message memorable. “Slogans” are merely a “literary artifice” used to engrave what is being conveyed into the conscious or the unconscious memory of who sees, listens to or watches a commercial.

This has been the function of “slogans” at all times, since the process of advertising was created. These and the characters, usually called “mascots”, play the same role. We have had the “Kellogg’s Tiger”, the “Esso Tiger”, the “Cica Elephant”, the “Codfish on the back of the fisherman of Scot’s Emulsion” and even slogans we try hard to forget, such as “Hollywood’s success”, not to mention a host of other cigarette ad “calls” [13].

Pieces of advertising campaigns around the world, especially beer campaigns, have long discovered that “slogan”, “character”, “plot” and “similitude” (i.e., the proximity between the real and the universe of fiction) are part of the literary argument of “what” and “how” a “story” is told. Every story, in any advertising film, for example, contains these two elements: “reality” and “fiction.” This is why advertising campaign pieces that advertise beer are so peculiar [13].

Beer campaigns throughout the world have been challenged and criticized in many different ways and even legally banned on ethical grounds. None of the decisions, nor any of the arguments rationally (or irrationally) articulated against these campaigns are discussed here. What is discussed, from a strictly pedagogical point of view, is the literary aspect of the pieces that make up these campaigns.

In Russia, for instance, where the habit and the taste for beer is as widespread as it is in Brazil, one notices that the respective plots are constantly altered, adjusting them to the demands of contemporaneity. In other words, little by little what is conventionally called the “woman as object” begins to disappear from the plot of these ads and is replaced by a new character, the independent woman, a master of herself who now drinks beer out of her own will instead of merely illustrating the context of the ad. [13].

There are, of course, other examples in other circumstances and for other products.

However, still in the field of beer, another campaign film that emphasizes or highlights friendship, joy, the spirit of sharing, healthy social living and happiness should be mentioned. Well? What is all that about? It actually does not matter whether we change the “tone” of the ad, but rather how we “tell” the story or devise the argument of the plot so that it lasts less than half a minute.

Conclusion. Every movie, every ad, every thirty seconds, at all times of advertising as it is known today can be understood as a separate piece, a kind of “literature” that only exists in that context. By claiming that this is an unfinished novel of a genre that is still quite vague, we aim to draw the attention of publicity scholars to an aspect yet to be explored, i.e., the cultural consequences of that phenomenon.

Those consequences necessarily require a new pedagogy of advertising, the training of new professionals and the narrowing of the theoretical contents of advertising and literature. If, on the one hand, it is already known that the understanding of everything that makes up the aesthetic framework required to meet the taste of the audiences in advertising is important, one has to point out, on the other hand, that the understanding of the assumptions of literature will help deepen the understanding of what is being said, informed, communicated by the pieces of advertising campaigns.

Today, as countless subdivisions of knowledge are being explored by serious and complex studies, not only in advertising, but also in other areas of the human sciences, it has become essential to discuss advertising as a literary genre. I refer here mainly to studies of narratives which, in addition to meeting the requirements of knowledge in the fields of journalism, public relations, administration etc., must also meet the needs of this new field, in which literature contributes to the studies on the creation of advertising.

Like Jean-Paul Sartre thought, writing is an act of creation, whose nature consists in construction to the imaginary. Writing is an act of constructing the imaginary. It does not matter if someone writes it in the field of fiction, poetry, drama, biography, description of a scientific research, a book for children, and so on. On this subject, the late professor Jean-Louis Santoro wrote that it is more important to understand what to say. For this way readers, or audiences of any narrative being told, understand and react upon it.

These ideas are not new. Neither Sartre's nor Santoro's. They remind me of a lesson from the also late Professor Jean Devèze at the Université Paris XIII, in the distant year of 1997, in which he reaffirmed: “Communication exige toujours deux phénomènes: le phénomène de l'expression de ce qui est dit ou montré, et le phénomène de la façon dont il est perçu et compris. Il peut y avoir communication sans comprendre. dernières choses auraient sans importance si elles ne sont pas comprises. Tout ce qui est écrit est exprimé pour être vu, entendu et besoins perçus sont compris. Pourquoi l'objectivité est important. Mais il est aussi très important que la subjectivité est perçue. L'ex-

emple principal est la publicité. Il y a beaucoup de subjectivité dans la publicité, mais il est une subjectivité intentionnelle, ce qui renforce le contenu objectif de toute annonce. Il n'a même pas d'importance si les savants, les théoriciens de la littérature considèrent la publicité d'un genre littéraire ou pas. A chaque instant, partout dans le monde, peu importe où, à la télévision, sur Internet, dans les smart phones, dans les journaux, dans les magazines, sur les panneaux d'affichage, sur les lampadaires, dans tous les médias, des centaines de milliers des cas, des histoires, des dépositions, des témoignages, avec ou sans humour, sont comptés. En fait, on a beaucoup plus que cela. Objectivement et subjectivement, de façon grave ou drôle, tout est compé en quelques secondes. Tout est parfaitement compris. La publicité est une façon de dire les choses, qui justifient la considérer un genre littéraire" [8].

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